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AVETIK ISSAHAKIAN

Selected Works



POETRY
and
PROSE



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Аветик Исаакян
ИЗБРАННОЕ

На английском языке

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INTRODUCTION



N. Tikhonov

*

AVETIK ISSAHAKIAN

(1875-1957)

I

The beauty of the Akhmangan heights is beyond compare. Below lies the whole of mighty Lake Sevan, green as an emerald set in a stone shield. From here, slashed by gorges and extending on either side far to the north and north-west, can be seen the silver-grey, smoky, pale-blue and violet crags of the Armenian highlands. Shadows travel down the slopes, only they are not really shadows, but groves running down to the brooks and streams whose tracks can be seen glittering and foaming on the dark rocks. These bright water-courses run down to the villages and collective farms of the new Armenia. Below, there are human voices, herds of cattle grazing, cars and lorries, and all the many different sounds of human activity. But up here in the silence of the mountains, only the eye registers those soundless spaces over which the hawk soars; and if you look back towards the south, you see, towering over the fractured rock formations and the proud solitude of the mountain summits, the enormous shape of Ararat. Wrapped in mists that billow like the smoke from a gigantic bonfire, it thrusts its peak heavenwards with titanic strength, the patriarch of the mountains swathed in a pall of cloud.

After marvelling at Ararat, you return to the vast and colourful panorama below of Armenia, a country where a new

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world is rising over the dust-covered ruins of the many-centuried past, and where a new wisdom is transforming these virgin and forbidding spaces.

You go down from the Akhmangan heights into the gorge of the Garni, leaving the vast silence of the mountains for the noisy world of Yerevan; but the feelings that so inspired you up there on the heights are still with you even down here, and you seek an answer to the question: is there a song of Armenia to convey, with the poetic power which conquers the human heart once and for all, everything that you have just felt and experienced?

And you find the answer. Yes, there is such a song. It was composed by a wonderful Armenian poet. All the creative work of Avetik Issahakian is just such a song of Armenia's past, present, and future.

2

In Issahakian's tranquillity, in his confident ease of movement, in his manner of talking, and in the profound gaze of those searching, slightly quizzical eyes, there was something that suggested the popular image of the sage—just, frank, austere, and exacting. The blood of peasant forbears flowed in his veins. As a boy, he ran over the hot, dusty earth, bathed in the stream, and lived among the people. Sun, moon and stars came to him not from an astronomy textbook, but from folk-tales, and they also spoke to him with simplicity and wisdom in the language of the people.

This sense of kinship with the people stayed with him for the rest of his days. As a mature artist, he used to think back on his long life, and he could say with satisfaction that he had not been seduced by the facile temptations of decadence and that the demands of fashion had not led him astray from the beautiful

road on which the poet remains with the people, with his native language, however great the distance in time between him and the land of his boyhood.

He speaks in his writings of his great love for his native land and for man disinherited and suffering in the world of the past, a world of evil and oppression. This profound patriotism, which dominated his thoughts and dreams, was born in him when he was still at school.

He eagerly read books which told how his native land had once been peopled by warriors, beautiful women, great poets and wise men. Their existence had still left its traces—the ruins of fortresses and cities on the rocky height; their ballads and songs still lived. All this seemed as majestic and remote as the sun going down behind clouds; but around him, in the simplicity of their everyday lives, the little boy could see only peaceful toilers earning their bread by the sweat of their brow.

However, he liked their handsome, dark, weatherbeaten faces, their unhurried gait, their grave dilatoriness, their fierce, angry voices, their dignity in the hour of sorrow, their sudden passion at a feast or in a bitter quarrel.

As the little Avetik came to learn all about the tragic history of his people, his love grew for this harsh and wonderful land which nourishes the poet's heart with an abundance of recollections and makes a man strong and whole.

3

"I cannot recall without tears the name of Lermontov," said Issahakian, "a man who became a world-famous poet at twenty-five...." Delight in the greatest works of the poets swept through his being like flame. And, indeed, it was inevitable that his first teachers should have been poets of far-reaching and irresistible

lyrical power whose greatest works left ineradicable traces on the history of world literature. They were like mighty rivers carving deep gorges through gloomy crags—rivers whose furious voices, like a storm, swept through the narrows of the world.

There were Pushkin, Lermontov, Goethe, and Byron; the voices of Armenia's great poets; the voices of the folk-singers. And there were such masters of the art as Toumanian and Iohannissian to watch lovingly over the development of the aspiring poet.

The world of books was gradually revealed to him, with all the literary works of Russia and Europe, with the marvels of the East and West, with history supplemented by philosophy and art by science.

Then came the years of wandering in Europe. In 1893, Issahakian went abroad to continue his education. A new world enriched a poetic nature that craved for new impressions. Landscapes, peoples, cities, rivers, and the treasures of Europe's museums and libraries flitted across his gaze with kaleidoscopic brilliance.

But, as he observed European life in all its variety, learning steadily, writing down his impressions and reflecting on the destinies of the people, he inevitably returned to thoughts of his native land. Her needs and her concerns could not be shut out by picturesque alien sights or by the most interesting impressions of abroad.

The democratic quality of his poetry demanded involvement in life: the poet's voice had to ring out like a summons.

Issahakian's first collection of poems, *Songs and Wounds* (1897), clearly demonstrated what Armenian poetry could achieve. It was a fiery and passionate protest against ugliness in life, against the darkness of reaction. It was a pure, penetrating

voice, convincing and challenging, rising above the voices of so many poets immured in cloistered meditation, taking the path of symbolism and rejecting the life and the struggle of the people.

His voice travelled far beyond the bounds of Armenia and evoked a very lively response. The power of the poems in this collection and of those that followed showed that Issahakian was a poet of the most far-reaching appeal.

In 1916, Alexander Blok said of him: "Issahakian is a first-class poet. Perhaps there is not so fresh and spontaneous a talent in the whole of Europe now."

He sings man's praises, pitying him and yet enthralled by him at the same time. He extols love, and his song rings forth like that of the "singer of love who was consumed by the fire of love". He turns more and more to the treasury of popular folk-themes and airs.

In the songs of Mount Alagez and the songs of the minstrel can be heard the voice of the Armenian people, pure and resonant as a mountain stream. Human voices intermingle with the song of the nightingales, the fields and vernal groves give voice, there is the heat of earth and the mountain breeze, partings and meetings, and the voice of the young Zaro, the lyrical heroine of Issahakian's new cycle of poems.

These songs reveal a masterly and subtle lyrical miniaturist who could, in a few words, express something so precious and, at first glance, so simple, that is also to be found in the lyrical gems of Russian poetry.

4

Alagez! A mountain summit shining with snow and the bowl of a lake with its pale-blue shimmer reflected on the surrounding crags. Issahakian's songs of Alagez glitter like that blue lake as

if reflecting the sky, and not for nothing are they considered the pride of Armenian poetry.

The power of Issahakian's lyrics is that he could turn the most personal into the universal; it seems as if these little songs had always existed, had been alive among the people long before the poet, who merely overheard them and wrote them down.

In a discussion of the lyrics of this remarkable poet, it would be a mistake not to dwell on one special feature, typical of what is best in the democratic and popular trend so characteristic of Issahakian's work.

Issahakian's lyrical poetry is socially significant. It gives us the key to an understanding of the poet's inner world and lets us have an idea of the road he took; and this road was not a tree-lined avenue through an exotic landscape, it was a pure and powerful song in the open spaces of his native country. It is a song sung by simple people, and many poets might well envy the way the Armenian people love and treasure their poet.

Dozens of his poems have been set to music and enjoy widespread popularity.

5

Avetik Issahakian knew that the world needed a new lease of life. He had seen the rumbling volcano of revolutionary struggle, and in his own verses he summoned the people to freedom, to take revenge on their oppressors. In 1911, fleeing persecution by the tsarist secret police, Issahakian went to Constantinople and from there to Europe. The next years were spent in wanderings far from his native land.

The October Revolution ushered in a new stage in

Issahakian's work. He could turn to Armenia and say from the bottom of his heart:

I see you now before me, new and shining,
With traces of an old, eternal beauty.

Alongside this eternal, ancient beauty, there began to emerge the beauty of the new age, the beauty of liberated Soviet Armenia, and the poet saw the new Yerevan glittering with a thousand lights; he saw how men and women from the people had become masters of their own life, how the deserts had blossomed, how canals and roads had been built, and how collective farms and factories had grown up in the hands of a self-confident, proud and forward-looking people of the Soviet land.

In 1936, when he returned to Soviet Armenia from his wanderings abroad, Issahakian said: "I have come back to stay in the country where great things are being achieved in the national and universally human sense."

He knew the past of this country well; now he could see its present with his own eyes, and this present inspired him with new strength.

Totally absorbed in his work, the creator of remarkable and inimitable poetry and prose, Issahakian was also engaged in important scientific and public activities as an Academician of the Armenian Academy of Sciences, a deputy of the Supreme Soviet of the Armenian Republic, a member of the Soviet Peace Committee, and Chairman of the Armenian Writers' Union.

He was awarded the State Prize of the USSR for his militant and patriotic poems written during World War II.

The people know and love their poet. His verses are sung as songs in the towns and villages of Soviet Armenia. His portrait

hangs in the libraries and schools. His works are published in huge editions in Armenian, Russian, and other languages of the Soviet Union.

The poems of Avetik Issahakian, which he bestowed so generously and sincerely on the people, are helping the Soviet Armenians to build a beautiful new life.





POETRY





MOUNT ARARAT

On the ancient peak of Ararat
The centuries have come like seconds,
And passed on.

The swords of innumerable lightnings
Have broken upon its diamond crest,
And passed on.

The eyes of generations dreading death
Have glanced at its luminous summit,
And passed on.

The turn is now yours for a brief while:
You, too, look at its lofty brow,
And pass on!

1926



FIRST TEARS

The spring sun with an infinite kiss
Called out the shoots and flowers to life,
And the violet with blue eyes
In artless innocence smiled at everyone.

The zephyr came and whispered
Into its virgin ears, and glided away;
The butterfly came and fluttered
In its soft embrace, and flew away.

And the violet remained looking
After them with deluding reveries;
And from its immaculate eyes fell
The pure tears of first love.



* * *

Beneath this willow-tree we sang
Enchanting songs of love;
We sang and breathed in
Fragrance, smiles, and sorrow.

Beneath this willow, priceless friend,
You promised to love me;
The days went by, the willow withered,
And you forgot all about me.

1901



* * *

The night came, the cool breeze blew,
And the stars called out to the moon;
The moon rose, then slid into the blue sea,
And the fowls called out to me.

I stood up, filled with inspiration,
And plucked the cords of my heart.
My heart laughed, my bosom throbbed,
And the cords were broken....

Only the cord of love remained
In the infinite depths of my heart;
And the ardent song of love shone
In all the folds of my life....

1895





* * *

Dark, leaden clouds heaped upon your brow,
You were veiled in mist, Alagez.
There was no sunshine within my heart,
It, too, was veiled in mist, Alagez.

I saw your beauteous flanks as I went past,
There is no heart without sorrow;
If only you knew it, dearest Alagez,
There is no sorrow like mine!

O, fairest fowls of Mantash,
If my sorrow were your own,
Your brightly coloured feathers
Would turn black as the night.

O, gentle breezes of Mantash,
If my sorrows were your own,
Your fragrant flowery scents would turn
Into poisonous, suffocating air.

Alas, both my wings are broken, Alagez,
And I have fallen into your bosom;
O, let me press my heart to your grieving
heart,
Let me shed tears of blood; O, let me
Alagez...!

1898





* * *

Evening came and, entering the houses
One by one, lit up the lamps;
But, alas, it did not visit me,
And my house remained dark like my heart.

All the neighbours returned home from the
fields
And sat round their tables for their meal;
What became of you, my dearest brave one,
My eyes, fixed on your road, turned into lakes
of tears.

Then came the night and brought dreams
Full of colourful images to those that slept;
But, alas, I was left alone and without sleep,
You are my dream, and you did not come to me!

1900



* * *

When I die, oh, bury me
Upon the slopes of Alagez,
That the winds from Mantash
May blow upon me and depart:

That all around my grave
The cornfields may sparkle,
And the willows, with hair loose,
Lean over me and shed sweet tears....

1899





* * *

“Pretty maiden, if I were the earth,
What would you become?”

“Handsome youth, I would become spring,
That I might adorn you.”

“Sweet maiden, if I were the sky,
What would you become?”

“Gentle youth, I would become the sun,
That I might consume your heart!”



* * *

A hard, black stone upon my heart
In the dark depth of my grave,
With a mountain of grief upon my heart,
I slept the sleep of the earth.

Spring came and with it came my Shoushan,
She called to me with the turtle-dove;
She, my turtle-dove, sat upon my stone,
And called to me in a tender voice.

"Rise, my dearest one, the willow-trees
Of River Arpachai have blossomed;
I have brought you a spray of branches,
The willows ask you to call on them.

"Rise, dearest one, for spring is here,
The mountains are all clothed in red;
I have brought you roses spangled with dew,
Come, let us wander about the mountains.

"Rise, my dearest, the breeze is cool,
The sheep have all gone to the mountains;

There Alagez has opened up its heart:
Let us go and visit Mount Alagez!"

With a hard, black stone upon my heart,
And the old, deep wound within it,
Alas, I could not rise to my feet:
For love had died in my breast.

1901





* * *

I saw a sea in my dream,
An azure and tranquil lake;
Upon its solitary shore
I had fallen down wounded....

Panting gently and softly,
The sea was in endless thought;
And my deep wound pained me,
While I was powerless in despair.

And a voice flowed into my soul,
A voice from a tender, sacred heart:
It was my mother, calling to me
From the shores of my native land.

1898





* * *

Under the linden trees
Silently I meditate;
A distant violin
Sadly laments away.

As if in darkness,
Upon my destiny
Like a fond mother
It seems to weep. —

An unrelenting hand
Weighed down upon me,
Crushed my love, my song,
My spring, and my dreams....

Under the linden trees
Silently I grieve;
A violin weeps away
Sadly with me....

1914



DEATH

Unseen and unheard,
Like a caravan,
Night and day
It moves on and on....
It crushes to dust
The whole world
And scatters it
To the wind.

And forevermore
It moves on and on...:

1908





ETERNAL LOVE

I

The palace of Tadmor is built of light,
In the desert, like a dream woven with gold;
It rests upon seven hundred marble columns,
With its tower soaring into the depths of the sky.

In the pretty date-palm groves all around
Sing the wonder birds with yearning;
The fountains seem ablaze with fiery sparks
And embellish the flowers with silver.

Upon the throne, the young El-Saman
Tenderly embraces the beautiful queen,
Whose undulating tresses float upon her bosom,
Like water-lilies on the surface of a spring.

The turquoise sea that clings to the steep,
Ever-dripping, rocky flanks of the Lebanon,
Has no foam to match the snowy whiteness
Of the queen's radiant bosom.

Pages and maid-servants with golden hair,
Surrounding the joyous royal throne,

Make music, dance, and sing constantly,
Right through the night and through the day.

II

When the lights of the palace expire,
When the moon, like a silvery swan,
Caresses the waters of the pond,
El-Saman whispers like the breeze.

He whispers so tenderly and so softly
Into the ear of the princess bathed in light,
Like the velvety moonshine reflecting
Upon those imposing marble columns.

"The canopy of the heavens is lofty,
But my love is much loftier, my dearest;
The bowels of the earth are deep,
But my love is much deeper, my dearest.

"Venus itself, which colours in purple
The very lips of the lamps of Tyre,
Does not have such red, red flames
As those of your velvet kisses.

"My beautiful palace will fall into ruins
And be covered over by the desert's breath;
The immense sea of Sidon will rise
And capture every corner of the desert;

“Time will ultimately reach its end,
The sun will turn into a handful of ashes,
But my love has no end, no course to run,
It is eternal, inextinguishable, immortal...!”

Under the annihilating, magical kisses,
As with the old wine of fairy-tales,
El-Saman grows faint and melts away....
Time turns into an instant and eternity....

The dreamy scent of musk and frankincense
Wafts through the ebony doors of the palace;
The pages and maid-servants make music
And dance and sing away joyfully....

III

Silence crouches under the wing of death,
The solitary, dimming lamp flickers;
And the gentle, pallid princess is dying
Upon the mourning El-Saman's bosom.

She is dying like the dew in a bud,
Like an infant in a mother's saintly arms,
And El-Saman murmurs, whispers
Like a prayer into the poor princess's ear:

“I will destroy the canopy of heaven,
I will not, I will not let you die;

I will drive away and defeat evil death,
I will not, I will not let you die!"

And he embraces the fading princess,
Defying death with sword and shield.
And into the princess's cold and lifeless lips
He injects his fiery love and breath.

IV

Many moons have come and gone, yet still
El-Saman firmly embraces the dead princess,
Whispering softly into her ear,
As the moon shines in among down the yellow
columns.

The pages and golden-haired maid-servants
Have abandoned the palace in terror;
The date-palms softly rustle in melancholy,
And the bright flowers and lights have faded
away.

The fountains are sobbing and crying,
The spider weaves webs from column to column;
Only the desert wind comes visiting,
Whistling and whispering round the throne.

The snake wipes with its cold and shiny flanks
The silent dust off El-Saman's bones.

But with his skeletal hands, El-Saman
Still embraces the decayed princess.

And into her dead ear, silently
And eternally whispers El-Saman
With his dead, frozen lips without voice,
As the moon shines down the fragile columns.

The groves have withered and disappeared,
And the bright veil of the columns has vanished;
The desert has spread a yellow veil
And covered up the palace of Tadmor....

And upon the sandy tomb there stands,
Erect and as witness, the solitary tower,
That the bright, distant stars may know
Of El-Saman's great and immortal love;

That the caravans and travellers from afar,
That come and go to distant lands, may tell
The world, with awe, of the victorious love,
Of El-Saman's perpetual and eternal love....

1914





ABOU ALA AL-MAHARI*

Abou Ala al-Mahari,
The famous poet of Baghdad,
Lived very many years
In the splendid city of the caliphs;
He lived amid glory and pleasure,
Sat at table with the mighty and the rich;
He disputed with scientists and sages,
He loved his friends and tested them;
He visited many different lands,
Observed and studied men and their laws.
And his penetrating soul came to know Man,
Whereupon he deeply hated him,
As well as all his laws.

And since he had no wife and children,
He distributed his wealth among the poor,

* *Abou Ala al-Mahari* (975-1058)—Arab poet born near Aleppo, he lost his sight from smallpox as a child and spent nearly all his life in Northern Syria having gained some local fame. He passes a harsh and almost atheistical judgement on the world and zealously and rationally attacks injustice, hypocrisy and superstition.—*Ed.*

Loaded his small caravan of camels with
provisions
And one night, when Baghdad was asleep,
By the banks of the Tigris clad in cypresses,
He secretly departed from the town....

First Canto

And Abou Ala's caravan,
 babbling softly like a spring,
Ambled through the slumbering night
 to the melodious tinkling of the bells.

With measured tread, the caravan
 plodded on its meandering way,
And the tinklings poured out gently,
 flooding the tranquil plain.

Meanwhile, Baghdad slumbered peacefully
 with bright, luxuriant dreams of paradise;
In the rose gardens, the nightingale sang
 sweet gazals with tears of love.

The fountains gurgled away happily
 with the radiant laughter of diamonds,
And from the illumined palaces of caliphs
 a serene fragrance wafted around like
 incense.

"I dearly loved my friends greatly,
as I did all people far away or near;
Now my love has turned into a viper
and my heart seethes with venomous hatred.

"I now hate what I loved before,
what I have seen in the human soul;
In the human soul, so base and worthless,
I have counted a thousand abominations.

"But more than all else, I hate
the thousand and first: duplicity of soul,
That adorns the human face
with the halo of innocent saints.

"You, human tongue, that with heavenly
fragrance and colour, with a bright veil
Cover up the hell of man's soul,
have you ever uttered a true word, I wonder?

"Go, my proud caravan, penetrate
the wild flaming desert,
And rest beneath those coppery,
russet rocks, beside wild beasts.

"Let me pitch my tent, upon the nests
of snakes and scorpions let me pitch it:
I am a thousand times safer there
than among men, deceitful and smiling,

“Safer than with a friend, upon whose bosom
I used to lay my head willingly:
The bosom of a friend, who veils with lies
the precipices of irrevocable destruction.

“As long as the sun scorches
the proud peaks of Sinai,
And the yellow dunes of the desert
form eddies like waves,

“I do not wish to greet people,
or to break bread at their table;
I will sit and eat with wild beasts
I will receive the greetings of hyenas.

“Let the wild beasts tear me to pieces,
let ferocious gales howl against me;
And thus, until the end of my days,
go, my caravan, on and on without return!”

And for the last time, Abou Mahari
turned round and looked at slumbering
Baghdad:

Then he looked away, his brow furrowed
and clung to the camel's hairy neck.

He caressed it tenderly, with his fevered
lips he kissed the camel's limpid eyes;
And from his eyelashes there hung
two irrepressible burning tears.

“Abandon yourself to the sea in a battered boat
rather than believe a woman's promises:
She is a bawdy whore, a perfect hell,
it is Eblis* that speaks through her mouth.

“You have dreamt of the distant star,
of the angel-winged, white lily,
That it may be a balsam for your wounds,
a beam of hope in the torment of life.

“You have yearned for the song of the fountain
that summons you from luminous lands,
And you have dreamt of the dew of immortality
and wept sweetly on the bosom of heaven.

“But the woman's love gives to your burning soul
salt water, that you may always be thirsty
And in your fiery passion you may drink
her victorious body and yet not be quenched.

“Oh, lustful, snake-like body of woman,
diabolic vessel of evil crimes,
With bitter, carnal pleasure,
you turn into darkness the sun of the soul!

“I hate love, pitiless like death,
eternally burning, wounding secretly:

* Devil.—Ed.

That sweet poison which turns into a slave
or a tyrant, he who is intoxicated with it.

“O love, you tormenting force of nature,
cunning and treacherous spirit without
retreat,

You are the entrails of enraged chaos,
pain-afflicted blood, and nightmare of blood!

“I hate woman, that element of passion,
forever proliferating unbridled crime,
That inexhaustible fountain which
accumulates upon earth the mire of evil.

“I hate yet anew love and woman,
her unfeeling kisses of flattery,
I flee from her marshy couch
and I curse her pangs of childbirth,

“Her cruel and eternal bearing of children
that floods the world with a swarm of vipers,
Which bite and tear each other apart,
polluting the stars with the lust of venom.

“He who becomes a father is a knave,
that from the blessed bosom of nonentity
Calls into existence the miserable atom
and lights the hell of this life at its head.

“ ‘My father sinned against me,
but I did not sin against anyone.’ ”

Let these words be graved upon my tomb
if I should find a nook beneath the moon.*

“As long as the sea-waves lap
upon the emerald shores of Hejaz,
I will never return to a woman,
I will not yearn for her charms.

“I will rather fondle the harsh, wild thistle
and will kiss its thorns,
I will lay my head upon the burning rocks
and will weep upon their warm bosom.”

And the caravan with a faint tinkling
went on its meandering way,
Towards the dreamy, blue distance
it glided on leisurely and in peace.

The little bells seemed to be sobbing
and shedding ringing tears, one by one;
The caravan seemed to be weeping tenderly
for what Mahari had loved and abandoned.

And the soft flutes of the zephyrs
trilled delicate eastern tunes
Of sorrowful yearning, of wounds of love,
and of tender, visionary grief.

* These words are engraved on the tomb of the poet Abou Ala al-Mahari.—*Ed.*

And Abou Ala meditated gloomily
and his grief was like infinity,
As was his tortuous path,
stretching endlessly on and on.

Blending with the interminable track
he grieved silently, night and day,
His gaze fixed upon unknown stars,
his soul filled with bitter memories.

He did not look back as he journeyed on
and did not regret what he had left behind;
He would neither accept nor give greetings
to the caravans that went past.

Third Canto

And Abou Ala's caravan
babbled gently like a fountain,
Plodded calmly at a measured pace
in the soft rays of the moon.

And the moon, like the luminous breast
of a beautiful siren in paradise,
Now shyly hid behind a cloud,
now vibrant, brightly shone away.

The fragrant flowers, wearing diamonds
and magnificent ear-rings, slept,

The birds, with rainbow wings,
fondled each other with tender trills.

The breeze with the fragrance of carnations
whispered tales of a thousand and one nights;
The date-palm and the cypress tree,
in sweet slumber, swayed on either side.

Lending an ear to the words of the wind,
Abou Mahari spoke silently to himself:
"The world seems a fairy-tale with
no beginning or end, an enchanting miracle....

"And who has woven this sublime tale
with stars and a thousand wonders?
And who keeps telling it with such charm,
unwearied and in many a thousand ways?

"Nations have come, nations have gone,
and they have not grasped its meaning;
Only poets have understood it somewhat
and they stammer its immortal sounds.

"No one has heard its beginning
and will never hear its end;
Its very utterance lasts centuries
and has neither beginning nor end.

"But to every new-born being
this wonderful tale is told anew;

So it begins and ends
together with every man's death.

"Life is a dream, the world, a fairy-tale,
a passing caravan of nations and generations
That in the fairy-tale, through the vivid dreams,
goes invisibly towards the cemetery.

"Blind and dull people, without dreams,
not hearing this sublime fairy-tale,
You snatch the morsels from each other's mouths
and turn the world into a terrifying hell.

"Your laws are the yoke and the whip,
and the inextricable web of a demented
spider,
And with their venom you poison the song
of the nightingale and the visions of the
rose.

"You lamentable people, your vile hearts
and your evil deeds will turn into dust,
And the hand of time will with indifference
wipe and sweep away your filthy traces.

"And the wind with the breath of decay
shall howl upon your tomb stones,
For you remain ever impotent to enjoy
this enchanting dream, this golden
fairy-tale."

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“My soul is free, I would tolerate
no force that might dominate me,
No laws, no frontiers, no destiny,
no evil or good, and no judgement.

“There must be no guardian
over me, no law;
And everything outside my will is but
prison, enslavement, and constraint.

“I want to be infinitely free, without debt,
without master, and without God;
My soul craves naught but freedom, immense,
immeasurable, and without limit.”

And the caravan wound its way on
and above it brightly shone the stars,
Freely, with the smile of children,
glittered those eternally brilliant
jewel-eyes.

And the bright winking of the golden stars
called to him with affection
And filled his soul with the sublime ringing
of the myriad crystalline bells of the sky.

In the limpid night, with bewitching reflection,
shone the path in the turquoise distance,
And the caravan swayed as it plodded on
peacefully towards that faraway land....

Fourth Canto

The redoubtable night, black and immense,
spread out its wings like a monstrous bat,
Its huge wings that descended and covered
the caravan, the track, and the vast plains.

And from horizon to horizon
the sky was filled with sombre clouds;
The moon and the stars shone no more,
the darkness seemed shrouded with darkness.

And the fearful gales galloped about
ferociously like unbridled horses,
Causing whirlwinds and mingling with the clouds
the earth and the dust of the scorched
plains.

And with deathly trembling, they whined
and howled in a thousand cries,
As wounded wild beasts roaring
and bellowing through the mouths of the
gales.

In the narrow valleys the gales twirled,
and in the virgin forests of palms
They sobbed with melancholy,
like a lonely heart weeping in despair.

"Go against the gales, caravan, tread
indomitably on to the end of the world!"

Thus spoke in the depth of his heart
Abou Mahari, the great poet.

“Howl upon my head, ferocious gales,
explode upon my head, you tempests,
I stand before you with brow exposed,
I am not frightened, smite my brow!

“I will not return to the pestilent towns,
where tumultuous passions boil,
Cities of blood, where merciless man
always tears apart his own kind.

“You will not return home, my homeless soul,
you yourself extinguished your own hearth;
Woe to him, who has a settled home,
he is tied to its threshold like a dog.

“Assault my paternal home, O gales,
pull down, demolish its foundations,
And scatter its dust about the great world,
my only home is now the endless road.

“My love is now solitude,
my paternal tent, the starry sky;
And my friend is now the caravan,
and my repose is a restless journey.

“You, bewitching road, full of mystery,
my new homeland, so enchanting,

Take me, my heart eternally weeping,
to a place where men have never been.

“You must always be watchful with men around,
always on your guard with sword in hand,
That they may not swallow you up,
or tear you apart, be they friend or foe.

“Take me far away from friends
that, like unsatiable mosquitoes,
Pursue you when you have blood,
but, when you dry up, forget you.

“Who would have caused my deep wounds
if not companions or friends
That opened my heart with kisses
and stung it likewise with kisses?

“A thousand falsehoods in its source has
the kiss of man, the kiss of a friend,
With which he steals the secret of your heart
and turns you into an eternal slave.

“What is a companion, a friend, but artful,
disloyal, evil, and base?
In my soul there died the sky of love,
an ardent sun, and affection, and faith.

“What is a friend, but a prying slanderer,
one jealous of your good fortune greedily
watching you?

Dogs that know you do not bark at you,
but people that know you, never miss the
chance."

The gale like a fantastic jinn
mocked, applauded, and laughed
At Abou Ala's sullen face
and tugged firmly at his turban.

And it clung to the hem of his clothes
and, blowing handfuls of dust
Into Abou Ala's eyes, severed
the thread of his thought.

Fifth Canto

And the caravan confidently cut through
the tempestuous dance of the wild jinns,
Advanced, without swerving and without fear,
to the tinkling of the agitated bells.

"What is a friend..," relentlessly repeated
Abou Mahari angrily within his heart,
"But a black snake in your bosom, soiling your
couch?"

Fly, caravan, my true, intimate friend!

"And wherever you go from that place, move ever
on and on, without repose,

O kind road, take me away and lose me, that I may
disappear, and none may know my torment.

“And what have we left behind,
what is there to force us back with deceit?
Glory, treasure, laws, and power...?
Fly away, far away from it all!

“And what is glory? Today people
will praise you to the skies,
Tomorrow the same people will throw you down
to trample you under their hooves.

“What are honour, and the respect of people?
They render it through fear and gold alone,
But if you stumble, the wretch you tread upon
turns into a great man and strikes you down.

“And what is the wealth with which an idiot
rules over people, over talent, and love,
But the blood drained from thousands,
the flesh of the dead, and the tears of
orphans?

“What is the mob, but a great fool, persecutor
of the soul, and the root of all evil,
The anchor of tyranny, a double-edged sword
and a giant beast in its rage.

“What is society, but an enemy army,
with each individual an unchained slave?

Has it ever tolerated the flight of the soul
and the soaring of sublime thoughts?

“Detestable society, suffocating ring,
your good and your bad are a fearful whip,
An immense pair of scissors to trim
everyone equally and in the same way.

“I hate, alas, my motherland, too,
a rich pasturage for the debauched rich,
The ceaseless tiller of whose blood-stained land
gnaws at hard stones instead of bread.

“What is law, blessed by people, but the cruel
sword of those brutally strong,
Always suspended above the heads of the helpless,
slayer of the wretched and protector of the
mighty?

“I hate and abhor with vehemence,
I hate both justice and law:
Men oppress with their abominable justice,
crush and slaughter with their vile laws.

“With sevenfold hatred, indeed, do I loathe
authority, which swallows up generations,
Greedy usurers, voracious parasites,
eternal fabricators of wars.

“It is the great executioner and the great
brigand
of past centuries and of centuries to come,

The path it has trodden is all crime and
massacre,
the vengeful band, aborting terror.

“It sits upon my bosom like a monster,
its terrible fist pressing upon my brow,
And at every step I take, it chains me up,
and padlocks my tongue and my thoughts.

“It has always crushed our shoulders
and reached everywhere, squashing man;
And in the stern name of justice, it has
erected pyramids with a myriad skulls.

“And authority is everything:
justice, law, and right.
It is conscience itself, and evil, and good;
whereas you are mere dust, a nonentity.

"I curse authority, that raving
hyena with a thousand claws;
Its every step is a wine-press of blood
in which it squeezes the old and the infants.

“Impotent people, slaves and cowards, who put
swords into the hands of you and your kind?
Who gave you the right of vengeance,
to dominate and to slaughter your fellow
beings?

“Take me away, caravan, hand me to the vipers,
bury my miserable heart under the sands;
Carry me away, rescue me from authority,
rescue me from its ferocious protection!”

The violent lightnings with fiery swords
tore to shreds the mass of clouds,
And rapidly crumbled upon the white
manes of the distant mountains.

And the storms bellowed away, the palm
and the cypress rustled and rattled;
And the caravan, destroying bridges,
galloped headlong into the distance.

It galloped and flew, tinkling away,
covering the road with clouds of dust,
As if fleeing from the vengeful fist
of wicked authority, out of its reach.

Sixth Canto

And under the scorching midday sun,
the narcissus and the mint scented the air,
And the caravan, lost in the dust,
plodded leisurely, weary and hot.

“Fly, caravan, tear apart the winds and storms,
and enter the bosom of the desert!”

Thus spoke within his heart
Abou Mahari, the great poet.

"Let the flaming simoom of the desert assail me
and wipe away my traces from the sand,
That men may never find me
and may never breathe the same air.

"I can see now the tawny lions looking
into my eyes from behind the yellow dunes;
I can see them with their golden manes
from which the wind tears off sparks.

"Come, I call to them, I will not run away,
come and devour my wounded heart!
I will never return to people again and will not
knock on the doors of deceitful men.

"What are people but masked demons
with invisible fangs and claws?
They have hooves and are ruminants
with tongues of venomous swords.

"What are people but a pack of foxes,
infinitely selfish renegades and traitors,
Bestial child-murderers and executioners
lapping up blood, delighted with your
downfall;

"Cringingly selling themselves in poverty,
cowardly and treacherous in misery,

Lecherously evil, malevolent, vindictive
and arrogant in opulence?

“The good are sacrificed for the sake of the bad,
while the bad and evil oppress and torment
The handful of good people in this wicked world:
and in the field of life the weeds thrive.

“I curse you, people far away, your evil
and your good, and your religions,
Which only serve to forge chains
and erect dungeons for slavery.

“Iniquitous world, where mighty gold turns
a thief into a fine, trustworthy man,
An idiot into a genius, a coward into a brave
man,
an ugly woman into a beauty, a whore into
a virgin.

“The world of humans, that blood bath, where
the weak are guilty and the mighty are right,
Where imperfect man, whatever he does
is purely for material reasons.

“Purely for gain, ever a slave to profit,
which deifies the paw of massacre:
That is always man; the image of God, but
in reality, an abortion of the devil.

“Count one by one the innumerable paces
of my caravan, of my road without end,
Altogether they do not reach the number
of crimes committed by man in one day.

“This then is what I have to say to the East,
to the North, to the South, and to the West,
Whose winds, opposing one another,
together listen to my true words.

“Carry my fiery words away, proclaim them,
let the lands from sea to sea hearken
That if there is anyone baser, more detestable
than a brutal man, it is still a man!

“As long as the inextinguishable stars
continue to wink at the silent desert,
And the sand dunes roll away,
hissing and whistling like snakes,

“Run away, caravan, from those feasts
of lewdness, drunkenness and debauchery,
From places of falsehood and oppression
and markets of vile commerce.

“Run away from society, escape from revenge,
from the blood-stained justice of people,
Run away from women, from love, and friends,
run away breathless from the shadow of man!

“Go, caravan, trample underfoot,
tread upon and crush laws and justice,
And with the dust from your roads cover up
all evil and good, and authority, too!

“And let tigers and lions tear me to pieces,
and the fiery winds howl at me!
And thus, until the end of my days,
go, my caravan, go endlessly on!”

With their necks curved like bows,
the camels galloped swiftly,
Like arrows in flight, leaving behind
an interminable caravan of dust.

They galloped through the scorched plains
towards the unknown, towards distant lands,
Veiling with clouds of dust the boundless
plains, villages, and towns.

Like one frightened, Abou Mahari
fled speedily without rest,
As if the law, woman, and society
followed hard upon his heels.

And the caravan, tinkling as it sped
without a backward glance,
Went past the towers of large cities filled
with the tumult of bread-winning and passion.

It rushed hastily past villages, petrified
by centuries of ignorance,
It ran and plunged into the distance
with the unbridled yearning for the golden
star.

The unruly caravan thus lapped up
the meandering road, night and day,
And, his soul troubled, Abou Mahari
pondered angrily, with furrowed brow.

The furious caravan of his thoughts,
like hawks whipped by a storm,
Flew about in every direction,
craving to find a luminous shelter.

And he wept without tears,
and his sorrow was infinite,
As was his road that twisted like
an interminable snake and had no end.

And he did not cast a backward glance
and did not regret what he had left behind.
He would neither accept nor offer greetings
to the caravans that came and went past.

Seventh Canto

And Abou Ala's caravan
came to rest at the entrance

Of the vast Arabian Desert,
where it knelt down, wearied....

The horizons were ablaze in their
uninhabited, free shores;
Darkness gathered up its velvety skirt,
the sky was aflutter with crimson flames.

And Abou Ala sat in solitude,
his head resting against a sapphire rock,
His gaze immersed in the enchanting distance,
and his reconciled, radiant soul appeased.

“O, I am so free, boundlessly free!
Could this vast desert possibly
Envelop and embrace within its bounds
my endless, my infinite freedom?

“No human eye could see me,
no human arm could reach me here;
O, freedom, you shining fragrance
of matchless roses in paradise!

“Crown me with your magnificent roses,
light up in my soul your fiery torches;
O, freedom, you immortal Koran
of bright nightingales in paradise.

“A thousand greetings to you, magnificent rock,
you golden world of wisdom!

Blessed may you be, immaculate Desert,
where man has never persecuted man!

“Stretch out endlessly, spread the yellow
sea of your sands upon nations,
Cover up all mankind, its palaces and cottages,
covetous towns and villages, markets and
fortresses.

“With your dragon whirlwind, let freedom
reign over the whole world,
And let the sublime sun illumine
freedom with gold all over the globe.”

With thousands upon thousands of marvels
and flaming enticements,
The Shems-sun rose, resplendent and a gleam
with a thousand spirals of rose-coloured
satin.

And beneath the torches of the majestic sun
spread out the limits of the desert,
All ablaze in flames, like a huge, titanic
lion skin in golden splendour.

“Greetings to you, O sun, a thousand glories,
you, mightier than God, you, fountain of
life,
You, my immortal mother, maternal bosom,
you, the only good, the holy one.

“You, immense, universal goblet
of golden intoxication and blessedness,
You, expansive ocean of delight,
of charms, of fiery wine.

“You, kind sun, great rejoicing
of a thousand universal feasts!
Here is my soul, a thirsty bud,
pour into it your unadulterated wine.

“Inebriate me with your happiness,
your wisdom, and your eternity;
Give me oblivion of the past without waking
in the light of your perfumed dreams.

“Inebriate me, inebriate me,
inebriate me with your immortal wine,
That I may forget man, lies, and gloom,
forever forget evil and sorrow!

“Inebriate me with your grandeur,
inebriate me with your luminous ecstasies,
Invincible adversary against darkness,
O mother of spring, sea of happiness.

“You , the only goodness, you, my only love,
you, the only holy one, you, maternal bosom,
You, forever charitable, vanquisher of death,
you, the only supremely wondrous beauty.

"I love you, I love you!"

Burn me with ardent love, hurt me,
And spread your hair of sparkling gold
upon me and caress me.

“And make my lips bleed
with the scorching sting of your kiss,
Open your radiant bosom bringing happiness,
I fly towards you, aflame with love.

“And let my ears grow deaf that I may
hear the tumult of the world no more,
Let me grow blind in this world that I may
never look back to see people again.

“Soar towards the sun, kind caravan,
for centuries upon centuries,
Into its flaming bosom,
that I may become eternal like the sun.

"Oh, mother-sun, place upon my shoulders
the splendid golden foam of your blazing
 mantle,
That, drunk with love, in your bright glories
I may fly victorious towards you!

“You, mightier than God, you, my sole love,
my only mother, you, maternal bosom,
You, the only goodness, the unique holy one,
you, supremely wondrous beauty...!”

Final Canto

And the camels, like golden boats
cleaving the fiery waves
Of the desert sea, soared headlong
towards the brilliant, blazing distance.

And no simoom with wings aflame
could ever have outsped their galloping;
The wild bedouin's speeding arrow
could not have matched their flight.

From the oasis the fresh breezes brought
passionate strains of burning sorrow,
The milky fountains warbled
the dreams of their virgin hearts.

And the bright fairies
sent him kisses and greetings
With the soft rustling of the date-palm
and called him with secret promises.

But Abou Ala did not want to hear
the call of love, the tender murmurs,
He flew insatiably towards the sun,
and shone himself as brightly as the sun.

While mirages by a new vision
of a thousand delusions and lures
Carried away the bewitched soul
on golden wings of luminous dreams.

The camels, with loosened reins flew on
with vigour, fury, and madness,
They soared with fiery impulse,
as if frenzied and demented.

And under the ardent sprinkling of the sun's
rays
the camels were joyfully aflame,
And the bells, free and adorned with light,
tinkled noisily and merrily.

Abou Mahari, his eyes fixed on the sun
unblinking like an eagle,
Flew on without sleep, his soul ablaze
with torches of bliss and drunk with light.

Behind him, there spread out
but the naked desert in the bosom of light,
While above his head the sun flirted with
its sapphire hair in the infinity of space.

The golden-foaming mantle on his shoulders,
Abou Mahari, the great poet,
Flew relentlessly, victorious and majestic
towards the sun, the immortal sun....





PROSE





CHILDHOOD

There was a magnificent castle high, high above; so high it was that the eagle could hardly reach it.

The soaring plane and birch trees rustled there night and day; the dew from the ever-murmuring fountains glittered on their silken leaves.

The scent from flowers of paradise was in the air, and, beyond the marble walls, the sun-scorched mountains and valleys were soaked in nectar.

At night, the rays of the moon wove fairy-like veils of silvery thread and enveloped the magnificent castle.

From morning to morning, and from evening to evening, there came the merry sounds of carefree laughter from that place as if blue sails of dreams were fluttering on the golden waves of heartfelt songs.

One day, the gates of the castle opened and out came an armed youth riding a horse with ruffled mane.

The iron bolts sealed the gates behind him with a rattling sound.

The youth looked about him with shining eyes and spurred on the horse: he flew over the mountains and through the valleys and set foot in the world of humans. He fell like a feather into the mouths of storms and floods.

He went everywhere and saw everything. He visited abodes of pleasure, drank the starry sparkling wine and laid his head upon a woman's bosom closing his eyes under her burning kisses; and when he awoke his head was on a stone and it was someone else that now dreamed under the burning kisses in the beauty's arms.

He visited the cottages of the poor, where hungry parents snatched from their children's mouths morsels of bread as hard as stone.

He went to battlefields, where human blood flowed like wine and rendered drunk the killers with the unquenchable desire to slay, who were also destined to die.

He went to academies, where scientists merely blurred the clear waters of truth with their feeble, human minds.

He suffered chains, beatings, and torture, in dark dungeons because he tried to assist the poor and needy.

He put out his hand to the rich and on his calloused palm they placed the spit of contempt.

Then, tired and despondent, dragging his shaky knees, he went back and, leaning on his staff, stood before his magnificent palace.

He knocked on the gate but nobody answered.
He knocked and knocked again, but still no answer.

Days turned into years, but nobody answered.

Tired and despondent, he fell on to a stone in front of the gate, he pressed his wrinkled forehead to his shrivelled knees, he clasped his worn-out hands on to his head lashed by storms, and waited for the gate to open.

Then in his distant dreams he suddenly heard the happy sounds of carefree laughter and the fluttering of the blue sails of reveries, with the golden waves of heartfelt songs.

He waited and waited, but still nobody answered.

The entrance to the castle was forever closed to him....





THE GRIEVING STORK

On the tall poplar in our garden, where the tree divided into three branches, two storks, husband and wife, had woven their nest, a big and strong nest, so that they could settle there with their young.

Every spring, as soon as the snowdrops appeared, the storks would arrive, husband and wife. Flapping their enormous wings high above the village and, calling joyfully, they would come and settle in their old nest.

After resting for a little while, they would begin to work: they would fly out and find twigs, wood-shavings, feathers with which they would patch up their nest.

Some time would go by, and one day we would see three or four little chicks, swaying their heads out of their nest and cheeping.

We children would not leave them: we would follow closely every movement they made. Now we would see the parents go to the fields in turn, to bring back food for the chicks, now they would take their young on to the wings and teach them how to

fly, just as our grown-ups would teach us how to swim in the deep parts of the river.

One year, a great misfortune happened: the father-stork was standing on the edge of the nest, watching over the newly-hatched chicks, while the mother-stork had gone to the marsh to feed or to bring back some food.

Some hunters who had come from the town pitilessly fired their guns and killed the poor mother-stork.

Time went by, the father-stork waited: the mother did not return to feed them; he still waited, but she did not come. Towards evening he flew to the marsh to look for her.

It broke our hearts to see how the poor stork, with wings trailing, fell upon his wife's corpse, emitting tearful cries, flew up and down, now striking his head with his wings, now hitting the hard ground.... When darkness fell, he returned to the nest, gathered up the orphaned chicks under his wings and remained silent.

From that time onwards, we no longer heard his call.

Early in the morning, he would fly to the fields and river banks near the nest, always keeping an eye on the nest; he would collect food and bring it to the chicks.

When the chicks were fledged, the father would take them one at a time and would teach them how

to fly. The fledgelings would fly to the fields, would return to the nest gay and merry and, fluttering round their sad father, try to console him. Autumn came and they all flew away together.

The following spring our stork returned alone.

After gazing at the nest, he flew to the marsh and stood on the spot where his wife had been shot; he stood there a while and then returned to the nest.

He would go there every day and would stand sadly on one leg for hours, his neck curved and his head under his wings.

We would often see new, unknown storks approach his nest, talk to him in their stork language and would go away displeased.

Sometimes these visiting storks would try to sit next to him in the nest, would tenderly rub their beaks against his neck and into his feathers, but he would reject their caresses and drive them out of the nest.

On one occasion, a stork wooed him for three whole days. The more our stork repelled her, the more she tried; she would return, spreading her wings over him and burying her head under his feathers. But the stork was broken-hearted and did not want a new love.

We would often see him on moonlit nights

roaming about in the fields all alone and we would hear his sad call.

He lived thus for three or four years, sad and mourning, all alone and as a bachelor.

He would come every spring and leave every autumn. Then, one year, he departed, and when spring came he did not appear: we waited and waited, but he never returned.

The nest remained deserted for some time and then fell apart.





ETERNITY

It was on my wanderings that I met my beloved.

I was sitting alone and meditating under a tall tree in the garden one spring.

A maiden went by with her companions: she was as bright and gay as the beautiful young spring which, with the singing of birds, had spread over the flowers and the couch-grass.

I looked at her and she looked back at me: our eyes embraced each other.

That gaze was so familiar to me! Where had I seen it before? It was so very familiar as if I had known her all my life.... Perhaps I had seen her in a dream, or had played with her in my childhood days back at home.

I stood up and followed her like a shadow. After a while I saw her wandering about in the garden, without her friends.

"Good day," I said, "forgive me if I tell you that I have a feeling I have known you for a long time, a very long time, but I do not know where I could have seen you before."

"You, too, seem familiar to me, though I cannot recall when I have met you before. But there is no doubt that I have."

"I am a stranger in this country and I am breathing this air for the first time. Perhaps you have been to my motherland, my faraway home...."

"No, I have never been outside my country. What a strange meeting this is! How mysterious!"

"But your voice is so very familiar to me, I have known it of old; and especially your eyes: we seem to have met a thousand centuries ago...!"

"Yes, more than a thousand centuries ago...!"

We sat beside each other and looked at one another for a long time: and our souls were suddenly lit up with the memory of eternity—they recognised each other, my soul and hers.

"I recognise you, my immortal love. I recognise your eternally sweet gaze. You have always been mine, even before the sun and the stars," I said.

"It is true, you, too, have always been mine my eternal companion, always mine, before the earth came into being, when all the elements in space and time were in chaos."

"Yes, dearest, do you remember it...? We were atoms with the same feelings and the same desires, born together at the beginning of eternity, as part of one soul? We roamed about for innumerable centuries in the unknown realms of the dark

universe, alone and quivering, far from myriads upon myriads of other atoms, and isolated."

"Yes, my intimate companion, we wandered about, embracing each other in the infinity of space for millions upon millions years, millions of centuries, which passed like a second, because we were happy."

"Oh, we have been in such terrifying, tempestuous whirlwinds, on forming and disintegrating suns, but always inseparable and together, our love uninterrupted, and each yearning for the other...."

"But mighty elemental forces split us into two halves and separated us temporarily, that, inflamed by invincible longing, we might find each other again after countless centuries."

"Yes, my soul to love means to find each other...."

And she put her tender hand into my palm.

"Then, do you remember," I said, "almost half an eternity passed from our day of separation? It was on the newly-formed earth, the gigantic trees reached the crests of the lofty rocks, terrifying animals teemed in the waters and on land."

"I remember it so clearly. You were hunting a tiger with a large club in your strong hand when I saw you: I sensed that you were the companion-atom with whom I had lived for a million years. Your eyes spoke the language of eternal love."

"I, too, sensed the same and, impelled by some invincible urge towards you, I abandoned the hunt. And in a desperate fight of life and death against your clansmen, I seized you and swiftly carried you away to a cave in a distant forest."

"Then, one day you returned from hunting, with a huge pole on your shoulder: at one end was a wild boar, its head crushed, while at the other end crackled a gay, bright rose, the newly-discovered fire. It was a veritable miracle!"

"Oh, it was such a terrifying and yet marvellous day. I was in the forest, both heaven and earth thundered away; the clouds hung overhead like heavy stones, the rain came down in torrents, and suddenly a terrible flash of lightning struck the top of a tree like a mighty sword. At once the tree was aflame and I ran away frightened: then I went near, filled with curiosity. The branches of the tree were melting away and crackling merrily. I went closer still, I was wet from the rain and felt cold: that flickering, joyous, red fire that had fallen from heaven seemed very pleasing to me. I was getting warmer and without taking my eyes away from that heavenly beauty, I became aware of a delicious smell unknown to man till that day. I looked and saw that a burning branch had fallen on to the boar lying on the ground where I had killed it and one of its legs was being roasted. The delightful smell whetted my appetite and I tried to eat a piece from the roasted part.... It had a marvellous taste the like

of which I had never yet known during my many lives throughout the centuries.

“Do you remember how from then on we always roasted our meat? What tasty meals we had!”

“Yes, it was a real miracle when you brought the burning pole into the cave! I was frightened at first, but when I became used to it, I would not leave it for long. You would go into the forest to cut down trees and bring them home, while I constantly kept an eye on the fire, always adding wood to it, that it might not go out.”

“What enjoyable days we had around that heavenly fire! Our children grew up under its blessing. In the winter, we would sleep around it without feeling the cold, and even the wild beasts would be afraid to come near our cave. Do you remember what a long life we lived?”

“And from distant places, my dear companion, people would come to take away fire from our hearth. They would come to our cave on pilgrimage and would call our home a sacred dwelling. And thereafter, all homes where women kept a fire burning in the hearth were similarly named.”

“Yes, my precious soul, indeed I remember. As a result of that incident, a great deal changed in the lives of human beings: women would no longer go hunting with men, but would stay at home to look after the fire, while only we men would go to the mountains and the valleys, the fields and the forests, to procure food. We would fight ferocious

beasts. Those were the happiest days of my eternal life."

"After that, I remember our next incarnation. It was in the sacred lap of the Himalayas, in the eternal garden of spring, in the beautiful valley of Kashmir. I was a young maiden and you were a herdsman of silken-haired goats, with a melodious flute always at your lips. We met one evening in a field of flowers ... and our eyes met...."

"I remember, dearest, it was in the twilight of evening, I smiled as I offered you an unfading bunch of white flowers, which I had gathered on the high slopes of the Himalayas. We found each other with ever-renewed love and yearning, but, alas, our happiness was so brief. The barbarian hordes from the north invaded our paradise-like motherland, plundered by sword and fire villages and hamlets, took away our cattle and sheep. They wanted to take you away, too, my soul of souls, because you were always of unequalled beauty. I went forward to defend you, but a sword thrust tore open my chest and pierced my heart, I do not know what happened after that...."

"I did not leave your body, my sacred love. When they struck you with a sword, I seized the same sword with my own hands and thrust it into my heart.... Oh, what a tragic end, what a lamentable fate it was...!"

"But it is pointless to bemoan that now. With irrepressible longing for you, I was reincarnated. I

became a lion with a golden mane in the scorching Libyan Desert. I searched for you everywhere and could not find you. For days, scorched by fiery yearning, I roared away in the flaming desert, and the yellow sand would shoot up like a fountain under my breath. I went into the depths of the desert simply to look for you. Then, suddenly, I sniffed your irresistible scent from afar!"

"I can remember now, my eternal beloved, the terrifying roar of your immense yearning, which made my soul tremble. I sensed your very own breath, which had been with me down the ages. Driven by some magic power, I flew towards you. I was so happy under your mighty protection. Terrified by the threat of your shadow, the leopards and the tigers would not even dare come near our hunting grounds."

"But there is one memory that will never fade. Do you remember, my tender companion, the time when we lived in beautiful Hellas? I was a poor sculptor. It was during some public festivity: we recognised each other in the light of love, my soul saw yours, although we inhabited different bodies. You were with a company of noble ladies. Our eyes met. Then I lost you: I tramped about the whole of Hellas and wandered about all the islands, but I could not find you. I returned to my solitary cell and in sleepless nightly toil I fashioned out of shining marble your divinely harmonious form, which embodied the very concepts of goodness and beauty.

And I know that, inflamed by unbounded love and exhausted by wearisome toil, I would roam about half-demented, in public places and on the sea shore....”

“I remember with infinite sorrow, my immortal companion, I remember that festive day, I remember your eternal gaze, which had never embraced me during that life again. But years later, I saw that marble statue, which the whole of Hellas considered to be my twin and an artistic marvel. It was by some inspiration that I divined that the statue was the creation of the young man whose enchanting gaze had singled me out in a large crowd and had spoken to me with infinite love.”

“But it is strange that during each of our incarnations, however much the centuries might have changed and places altered, no matter what bodily forms our souls had taken, we would at once recognise each other without fail, the souls that spoke within our gaze would never change.”

“Do you remember, dearest companion, during our everchanging incarnation, we once began to live together thanks to a very happy turn of fate?”

“Which one do you mean, my fair one?”

And she placed her gentle hand on to my shoulder and spoke with the voice of her heart:

“Do you not remember...? We were in the magnificent valley of sacred Benares, on the banks of the River Ganges, you and I, so close to each

other, two lilies, two delicate lilies of the valley: the gentle breeze drew us together and we swooned in each other's embrace, drunk with the fragrance of each other's souls. As Buddha was passing by with his disciples, he saw us in our embrace, pointed to us and said:

“ ‘Look at these delightful beings, see how they love each other with heavenly love, these flowers. Verily do I tell you, the Nirvana that I herald is this supremely blessed love: love one another thus, my disciples.’ And he knelt down, kissed us and went on his way. And he seemed to have spoken words from the depths of our hearts.”

“I remember, I remember, my dearest, when he walked away, one of his disciples plucked us and gave us to the great teacher. Buddha reprimanded him, saying, ‘Why did you cause them pain?’ He caressed us with compassion and we withered away together, supremely happy in his divine palm.”

“Yes, we lived in supreme happiness and died likewise, but, companion of my soul, we were not always destined to find each other. Oh, how many times my soul came into this world, waited for your soul with yearning and desire, but never met you. How many times have I cried as I waited for you. I would fall asleep dreaming of you and wake up still alone. How many times has my soul remained an orphan among myriads of people, even though a great many offered me their love. In my centuries of reincarnations, I married so many

times, but I never loved my husbands, who had been brought into my life by blind, stupid chance and not by that eternal love without beginning, which has inspired and inflamed our souls from their atomic existence to the present day and will do so for all eternity. Alas, I have suffered greatly...!"

"Yes, my dearest, the same bitter existence was also my fate time and time again. I was often left all alone throughout my life. I grew old, dreaming about the caresses of my immortal love. I have often cursed myself for having been incarnated in this horrible world so full of evil forces.

"Oh, what monstrous torture it was to live without you. On one occasion, while endlessly seeking you in despair, I linked destiny with a maiden, whose gaze had a remote likeness to your divine look; but I was very unhappy. The loveless union turned into a terrible nightmare.

"Oh, how cruelly I suffered!

"But once, my dearest, I had a strange and touching encounter. I was a hunter and I came across a dainty roe in the mountains. It stood fearlessly and looked at me so intimately, so poignantly, it was a look from the depth of its soul! I understood the language of the eternal love in its eyes: of course, it was you. I embraced the roe, stroked it, kissed its dreamy eyes, and took it home. The roe slept quietly in my arms, pressing its muzzle to my bosom.

"I looked after it and cherished it until the day

it died, when it rested in my arms like a child."

My voice faded away in the silent sobbing of my heart. A melancholy silence descended.

"But centuries later, my very dearest, we had the good fortune to belong to each other again," I said breaking the silence. "You have, no doubt, not forgotten that I was once a Viking, fearless and undaunted. Curbing the fierce waves of the Atlantic, I reached the shores of Albion on my rudderless boat and snatched you away from your stern father, who reigned upon those shores. You looked into my eyes and read my soul; you recognised your old companion from the eternity of time and threw your arms round my neck with yearning, without taking heed of your mother's pleas. Do you remember it? You were a golden-haired maiden as shapely as a cypress."

"I remember, I remember, my intimate one of eternities, what a brave man you were, sun-tanned, and with hair like a lion's mane. My father offered you much gold for my freedom but I cried and did not want to be parted from you, and you refused my father's envoys with disdain.

"You had an ancestral castle on the shores of Skane, at the crest of the lofty rocks, above the nests of eagles. We used to live there. You would go to invade and plunder other countries, as far as the Spanish and Italian shores, and would return with untold wealth.

"But that time, our love had a very unhappy

ending, alas...! The only consolation was that our two pretty children remained alive. Do you remember those golden-maned lion-cubs?"

And her eyes grew dim with torrents of tears.

"Do not cry, my dearest, do not cry! I know that you are thinking of that terrible day when we went sailing on the ocean. Our children were not with us, they had gone hunting instead. Suddenly, a mighty storm blew up, the uncontrollable waves smashed our boat against the rocks and the ocean swallowed us up. We plunged into the abyss in each other's arms. But you should not cry, for darkness did not veil our eyes for long: were we not resurrected many more times to find each other again? But I always recall a noble reincarnation, which you have, no doubt, not forgotten. I was a young knight in the Armenian cavalry and on my way with my companions to defend our country. The innumerable hordes of fierce Persians invaded our country wanting to crush it. Our army was passing through a town, we stopped in a square and, at the balcony of a palace, I saw a beautiful, young maiden: it was you. Our eyes met once again. You threw a rose to me, we looked at each other for the last time, the trumpets sounded and our horses galloped on. I departed and soon fell on the red earth of Avarair in self-sacrificing battle, to the last breath embracing your sacred image in my thought."

"Do you know how long I waited for you, my dearest? I would pray and wait: I would despair and

wait again. The wandering troubadours would sing the praises of the devoted and brave knights and their wonderful deeds, and they would extol you, of course, my brave, undaunted one who never returned...!

“Many came back, but you were not among them.... The snows of winter melted away, spring came, the swallows returned to their nests, but you did not return...! Do you know, that grief pierced me through and through like a sword. I was left alone and without hope. To find consolation I went into a convent and became a nun. In the silence and solitude, I cried out my suffering and prayed for you until I closed my eyes, joining your eternally loving and adoring heart...!”

“Are you crying again, soul of my soul, but why? Do you not know that this is our everlasting fate: separation and reunion, separation and reunion again, thus a countless number of times, because our love itself is eternity that has always existed and always shall...!”

“For us, death has only been a temporary sleep and rest, sometimes a desire to escape some tormenting and hopeless plights...!”

“And, after centuries, our lips met once more with infinite happiness, and our souls were united once more in a kiss without beginning or end, and our eyes melted into each other....”



THE SONG OF LOVE

In a land of enchanting beauty, there lived a princess, tender and radiant as the purple light of dawn upon the white peaks of mountains, beautiful and delicate as a roe beside a forest spring.

The princess's castle was built upon a lofty height. It was a magnificent fortress, where she lived surrounded by pretty maids-of-honour.

The dawn would greet her earliest of all, and the fragrant zephyr of the mountains would caress her locks.

Who can live without a companion but stones and the stony-hearted? When a human heart ripens like the bud of a flower and sways in sweet dreams, then the heart seeks a companion-heart to love and be loved.

The time came and the princess's heart began to dream about an unknown, intimate heart.

The king understood why his daughter was so dreamy, so sad and pensive.... And he sent town criers far and wide announce that his daughter would be choosing a husband. Let suitors come, royal princes, noblemen, and knights and, ac-

according to the custom of the land, let them compete with one another at horse-racing, javelin-throwing, duelling, and running ... and the princess would give her heart to the victor.

There came youthful princes, noblemen, and knights from different countries.

The following morning all the competitors dressed in their fine, elegant clothes, gathered before the princess's palace to express their respect and devotion.

The princess with her maids-of-honour, like a moon with a cluster of stars, greeted the competing suitors from a high balcony. From below, they looked up at the king's beautiful daughter and were filled with admiration, their hearts burned with great valour and a desire to win.

The competition was to begin on the following day when there would be horse-racing, duelling, running, and javelin-throwing.

The princess had retreated to a wooded corner of the garden and was dreaming.... This time tomorrow the towers of the castle would be lit up with colourful lights, there would be the sound of music, and the king, sitting in the hall among the princes, would greet his fortune-favoured daughter, who would hold the victorious suitor's hand and approach her father for a blessing.... Tomorrow, oh, there were still hours to wait till tomorrow: a whole

night, a long, long night to pass. She was tormented with impatience. In her mind's eye she saw faces, brave and proud faces of youths.... "I wonder who will be the winner of my heart?" she asked herself. "I would give anything to know the name of my husband to be."

It was a silent and peaceful night. The stars, those bright flowers of heaven, spread their fragrance through the firmament, and their wondrous perfume spread over the world: the princess breathed that heavenly fragrance and was intoxicated by it ... her soul was so filled with love and yearning that she wanted both to cry and to laugh. But she so craved to cling and press her heart to a pure heart and to fly, to soar heavenwards and kiss the stars, the thousands upon thousands of stars....

Then suddenly from some far, faraway place she heard a song, perhaps it was some unknown heart singing this beautiful song, the like of which she had never heard before.

It seemed to her that she had embraced her beloved and was soaring in the sky and that the stars were singing that wondrous song.... She fixed her eyes more firmly on the stars and listened intently, while the song sounded more enchanting, more heartfelt, pouring out like a spring from infinity and gliding through the eternal regions....

But who was singing that song? The princess listened to it, bewitched. Her soul drank in every

sound. It seemed to her that she understood that song which said to her: "Without the sun the earth would freeze, as would men, flowers, and the whole of life; while without love there would be no need for the sun." Was that song called love, perchance? Was she listening to the song of love?

In the distance, the mountain peaks slumbered in the tranquil veils of the night. The belated birds with the soft flapping of their wings returned to their nests in the crevices of the castle towers or the dark branches of the trees.

But she still heard the song and it seemed to her that it was the flowers on the mountain slopes who were singing with their tender lips; or that it was the mysterious whispering of the forest, or the bleating of roes in their caves, or the singing of distant seas as they kissed the verdant shores. Perhaps, it was the desert singing ... or some human heart, the heart of some shepherd or some singer....

"Could a human heart sing so sublimely and so enchantingly, so deeply and so nobly?" she thought to herself.

She strained to hear the singing from unattainable regions: whereupon it seemed close to her, very close to her; it seemed that it was her heart singing, but when she became heedful of her heart, the sounds grew distant and plunged into eternity.

The song died away. The stars vanished, the dawn lit up its fires on the mountain peaks, birds

awoke and flew about in the air, and the village maidens hurried down to the springs in the valleys.

Early in the morning, before the competitors had forgathered in the square to begin the contest, the young princess told her father that she no longer wanted to choose a husband.

The king, who was very fond of his only daughter and always met her wishes, asked the visiting suitors for forgiveness and sent them away with presents and due honours.

Some time went by, and the princess put on some ordinary clothes and one night left secretly, climbed the mountains and, leaving no trace behind, went to far away places. She roamed about various regions seeking to hear the bewitching song and she heard many songs of different nations and different people: of shepherds, fishermen, wandering minstrels, but she did not find the like of the distant song she had heard that night.

Once, at dusk, she saw a strong, handsome youth, who, riding a mettlesome steed, was going past in victorious mood with his cavalry. He was returning from the battlefield, having defeated the enemy. All the warriors were happy and their eyes shone, while the horses neighed spiritedly.

When the princess saw the youth, she heard the wonderful song anew and she seemed to hear him singing it: she ran up to him, but he spurred his

horse on and went away haughtily. The song ceased. Who was singing it and what was it called? In despair, the princess sat by the side of the road. From the distance could be heard the muted sound of the sea. Darkness was descending: it was silent all around. The soundless sparkling of the stars flooded her sad brow.

When she stood up, she noticed a light shining in a nearby cottage. She was very tired and hurried towards it. She knocked at the door and it was opened at once. A woman was sitting in front of the fire with a baby in her arms and a boy was sleeping with his head on her knee: she was their mother, full of concern and tenderness.

When the woman saw her, she gently put her son's head on to a pillow, stood up, affectionately greeted the princess, who now looked like a poor beggar, and asked her to sit by the fire. When the princess saw all this, she was moved. She threw her arms with yearning round the woman's neck and cried bitterly, for she had suffered much and had been unhappy for years. And the woman consoled and caressed her: it seemed to the princess then that it was the mother's heart that was singing the wondrous song.

When she had calmed down, she gazed through the window for a short while: it was a gentle night, the stars were twinkling softly, the ears of corn were whispering; in the distance, the sea was murmuring, and close to her heart she could hear the woman's

gentle breathing: she truly felt that this was the noblest moment in her life and she was touched to the heart. She again heard the wondrous song, which all nature was now singing. And the maternal heart, the stars, the mountains bright with snow, the clear springs, the forests, and the birds were all singing that noble and wonderful song so much in harmony with her heart.

“What is that song called? Is it called love, perchance?”

Is that nameless song not poetry, perhaps: that devoted love for mankind, the earth, and the stars; that precious blending of the human soul and the universe into one; that poetry in which the soul becomes the universe, and the universe becomes the soul?

1900





THE ENAMoured WIND

One day a soft wind, gliding down from the Nubian heights, went past the haughty pyramids, descended to the banks of the Nile with its golden waves, and lay prostrate gasping at the feet of a young and elegant date-palm:

“I love you, my wonderful, my matchless queen. I am the unbridled, restive spirit of the world, here I swoon at your tender feet.... As I went from horizon to horizon, I saw your beautiful reflection in the sacred Nile and fell in love.... Open up your divine arms to me!”

But the palm-tree remained silent in disdain.

“Have you no pity, you who are so tender and attractive? Would you let me die at your threshold?”

The wind sighed and softly embraced the palm, trying to kiss it, but she pushed it away angrily and said:

“Why do you pester me so, you impudent wind? Who are you that I should love you? Go away, perish, you homeless, fatherless wanderer! I who am the dream

of royal gardens, how can I give my love to a vagrant?"

"But I love you with the vigour and the depth of all the seas," sighed the wind.

"Who are you but one wailing night and day amid ruins and aimlessly roaming along deserted paths? All doors are closed before you: in your jealousy you extinguish all lights, because you have no home; you cover with dust the velvety leaves and you chase and scatter them about, because you are evil and jealous, naked and poor. Go away from me, go away!"

"Do you not recognise me, my queen?" said the wind, "I am the mighty, the unvanquished spirit of the world. I am he that, howling up the sky-soaring rocks of the Himalayas, swiftly flies up, scraping the steely brow of the Parthian Demavend and storming the jewelled peak of Ararat, I can almost reach the heights of the Atlas mountains.

"I am he that, ringing through the emerald valleys of Kashmir, speeds away to tangle the first-created, impenetrable forest of the vast Amazon, like a maiden playing with her golden tresses.

"I am he that, rolling and twisting in the turbulent abysses of the Atlantic, soars up to the fiery stars. I am he that erects high mountains in the boundless Sahara, only to destroy them again. I am he that buried the first of the cities, Memphis, under a yellow deluge of sand!"

"I am terrified of you: you are cruel and wild," said the palm-tree trembling. "I only love the Nile. He is mightier than you, but also merciful. At night, he murmurs soothing lullabies and weaves my sleep with beautiful dreams which he brings from marble mountain peaks of distant lands.... Please, go away!" pleaded the palm.

"But do not fear me, my pretty one, because when I am in love, I become the gentlest, the kindest soul on earth. Do you not recognise me yet? I am he that wafts with his wings the scent of paradise over land and sea. I am he that strokes the fine strings of the stirring lyre and carries its melodies to lovesick souls. I am he that lulls the infinite silence of green forests, that weeps and laughs in the pearly springs.... I am he that moves the wings of eagles flying in the sky and weaves the manes of Numidian lions. I am he that from dawn to dawn caresses the black-browed maidens' hair, dark and beautiful like the night, and brings the dreams of the stars to them. And I am he, my queen, that whispers tender words to the statue of the royal Memnon, and here am I at your feet pleading love from you. Have pity upon me, loosen your tresses over me, I am tired and have suffered. Let me kiss you and let me forget my sorrows in happiness, let me think no more of my weariness of centuries and my carefree wanderings!"

"I do not love you, I do not love you," angrily replied the palm, "I told you that I loved the Nile.

He is strong and gentle. His heart is deep and filled with mercy! See how he caresses my face and keeps its reflection constantly upon his heart! See how very handsome he is, how sublime and serene. The diamond eyes of the sky look down at him with wonderment until daylight, the sun in its majestic glory shines aflame in his mirror.

"I love him and only him. His golden-lipped waves kiss me and cool my yearning soul. From morn to morn, he murmurs to me the enchanting songs of fairies and tells me wonderful tales.

"There, he is calling me, the sweet-scented shadow of my hair will descend upon his scorched brow. For him, and for him alone burgeon my kisses of fiery love!

"Go away and perish, you roaming, boastful wind!"

Thus spoke the palm and hung its tresses down upon the Nile, whose waves flew up towards the tree's lips aflame with love.

"You do not love me, and you despise me; now will you see who I am: your master, you brainless, arrogant palm! I am your master!"

And the wind roared and writhed in his fury. It churned up the motionless waters of the Nile with rage, rendered them turbid and poured them out of its banks. All the trees and all the plants crashed to the ground, with a noise like thunder columns of earth mingled with the clouds. The palm-tree shook

and trembled, and the enamoured wind embraced it with its firm, powerful arms, tore it up by the roots, and pressed it to its enraged and lovesick bosom. He carried it far, far away, towards the scorching desert, towards the sapphire seas, towards the mountain peaks adorned with snow....

1907





WHAT SOLACE IS

A widow's only son died, leaving the whole family in deep mourning and in extreme poverty.

The sorrowful mother, dressed in black, went and sat at the head of her son's grave and wept unconsolably, shedding bitter tears.

From morning until late night, she sat without food or drink, stunned by the depth of her grief. Only from time to time would she stand up to rekindle the lamp, from which a thin smoke curled upwards, blending with her sobs that spread over the village and entered every cottage.

"Poor woman," said the villagers to one another, "what sorrow has befallen her!"

And the experienced, old folk in the village forgathered, went to the sorrowing mother in the cemetery and said:

"Do not cry any more, poor woman; tears will not bring back your loss. It is the law of the world: we are born and we must die. Whoever is alive, let him glory. We belong to death, and death belongs to us.

We must reconcile ourselves to the will of the world.

“Return home, your grandchildren need you. Go, look after them and do your duty. Let the deceased sleep peacefully: be pleased that he was released quickly from this harsh world.”

Thus spoke the elders with cold and furrowed brows, but the mourning mother would not raise her head and cried even more bitterly and unconsolably....

And the rich people of the village forgathered, went to the broken-hearted mother and said to her:

“Do not cry any more, poor woman. Those who have died have died, those who live must live on. Your little orphans want to live. Return home, light the fire, gather your grandchildren round you, tend them, bring them up; they will take their father’s place in time.

“We are your neighbours, after all, and not strangers. We will help you in every way we can. Be comforted, return home!”

But the mourning mother would not listen to them. She did not raise her head, and she went on crying more bitterly and more poignantly.

At that time, a traveller was passing through the village. He heard that heart-rending crying, he was filled with grief and asked the villagers who had

gathered around the poor mother what had happened.

Then the traveller bent down and kissed the desperate woman's hands and wept bitterly.

Thereupon the bereaved mother raised her head, wiped her tearful eyes: it now seemed to her that someone had halved the heavy burden that was crushing her shoulders. And a ray of solace shone upon shadowed brow.

She stood up and, filled with new hope made her way towards her neglected home.





THE MEANING OF HAPPINESS

An old dervish with sun-tanned brow went to the Egyptian Desert to ask the Great Sphinx some questions that would solve the mystery of happiness.

The ancient Sphinx sat, calm and motionless, in the yellow silence of the desert. Its unblinking eyes gazed from the depths of the past into the mysterious distance.

The dervish went and stood statue-like before the Sphinx, thrust his long reed staff into the scorching sand, stared intently from under his gloomy brow, at the Sphinx and said:

"I have come to you after travelling to the far ends of the earth: everywhere I asked what happiness was, what it meant, and I was left without an answer.

"I have now come from the rocky summit of sacred Sinai, where Moses was given the Commandments. I posed the question from the voiceless height ... and I was left without reply.

"I have walked up the Nile, the prickly thorns have pierced my legs, the sun has scorched my white-haired brow, and I have reached your

threshold. Open your lips now, eternally sealed to the world and tell me, reveal what you have seen during the centuries with your all-knowing, all-seeing eyes: what is the happiness?

“From the cradle to the grave, man craves for happiness with unconquerable hope, but without knowing what it is. Tell me, reveal it to me and I will go from cottage to cottage, from palace to palace, and I will proclaim in a loud voice your revelation of the meaning of happiness to the South as to the North, to the East as to the West!”

And the silence of the great desert, after the old dervish's question, grew heavy again, and the ancient Sphinx gazed unblinkingly at the boundless distance again. Days went by, nights went by, and the dervish stood awake before it like a statue, waiting eagerly for a reply, but none came.

And when the days and nights had gone by, the dervish asked once more, and again the silence of the great desert grew dense and heavy.

Setting his white hair free against the biting wind, the dervish posed his question yet again, and his pleading voice came from deep down in the soul of all mankind.

And when he stopped, the Sphinx fixed its eyes upon the dervish and now its eternally silent lips moved and it replied in the voice of the desert:

“O man, born of blood and thirsty for passion, your mindless soul insatiably craves excitement. You are incapable of grasping the meaning of

happiness, your life of the senses is not worth your desires, and no goal merits your striving.

“But I will tell you and then I will be silent forever. Go, and do not disturb my blissful tranquillity any more!

“Go and proclaim to the whole world, to the South as to the North, to the East as to the West, the meaning of happiness: one must not feel, one must not think, one must not will, but only turn into stone, into stone, into stone...!”

And the lips of the ancient Sphinx turned into stone once more and calmly, imperturbably, it fixed its blank eyes forever upon the boundless distance, and once more plunged deep into immobility.

And the infinite silence of the desert grew dense and heavy again....

1910





A LOVE STORY

A minstrel sat under a green tree, holding at his bosom a *saz* with but a single, delicate string.

A singing stream flowed by the green tree. Its crystalline waves sang about the golden clouds that wreathed the diamond brows of the mountains, whence they leapt down and sang about the emerald fields through which they had flowed babbling away.

The minstrel softly plucked the string, and the string sobbed as it told a little love story.

There lived a beautiful maiden in a magnificent castle. She was as beautiful as a lily-white swan on the gold-sparkling waves of a pond.

She sat embroidering at her balcony, when a youth came from a distant land. He knelt before the balcony of the beautiful maiden's palace and pleaded for her love:

*For the sake of your love I have forgotten
My parents, my homeland, and the whole world.
Now my happiness is at your feet.
Look at me, if only just for once.*

But the maiden did not hear him, for she was dreaming as she embroidered away.

She recalled how one day a knight went riding past the palace, looked at her but once and spurred his horse on, but her maiden heart spoke with love, while the cruel knight rode away without ever looking back.

She cried unconsolably, left the castle and, taking up an iron staff, she wandered from country to country, knocked on every door, looked at every face to find her beloved knight who had gone away, away....

While the youth that had come from a distant land, again pleaded for her love on his knees and said:

*My soul is torn with love for you,
For centuries will I stand at your door
In snowy and stormy weather.
Only death can separate me from you.
You are my love, my life, and my death....*

But the maiden did not hear him.

She embroidered and dreamt again: she had traced her beloved one and was declaring her boundless love for him. But, alas, the knight in her dream did not hear her: he was on his way to a distant land, to seek the one he loved; he would either possess her, or he would not return, he would never return....

Days went by and the youth from distant parts again pleaded for her love on his knees.

The delicate string sobbed, shivered, vibrated, and suddenly broke.

The minstrel remained sitting under the green tree, the stringless *saz* at his bosom and this little love story remained unfinished. Though incomplete, it always sounds in my ear and I cannot quite remember whether I heard it while dreaming or awake. It is like a tale from days of yore that a pure soul had woven in a distant land.

1911





THE PIPE OF PATIENCE

The train wound through the flowery fields of Shirak. I looked through the carriage window at this corner of the earth so dear to me, where I had spent my childhood.

Now we go past Uncle Ohan's mill. It had merrily rattled away at one time. The stream had dried up now, the mill had long fallen into ruin. There were only three willows and a poplar tree left from the small grove that Uncle Ohan had planted round the mill.

How many times we had sat under those trees with Uncle Ohan and talked!

Much had gone into oblivion since those days, never to be repeated or return again. Uncle Ohan, too, was no more: he had long been dead and buried under those willow trees, as he had wished to be.

And I recalled your wise words, Uncle Ohan:
"People pass away, but the world remains."

Half an hour away from our mill, on the sloping bank of the Akhourian River, stood Uncle Ohan's small mill with one stone, its wheel driven by the

water of babbling streams that flowed into the Akhourian River. Uncle Ohan had built that mill with his own hands, as well as the cottage adjoining it. He also looked after the kitchen garden, which was not very big and went round the mill and down to the river bank.

Whenever I was at our own mill, I would often call on Uncle Ohan. I would give him tea and sugar as a present, that I might have tea with him and listen to his tales.

That was many years ago, during those artless times when Uncle Ohan's aged friends, tapping the stony paths with their staffs, would go from village to village, muttering some old song to themselves. With backs bent, they would plod their way to the mill just to smoke a pipeful of Uncle Ohan's choice tobacco and to have a little chat about olden days, and then they would plod back once more to their own village.

To my childhood imagination, the serious and solitary Uncle Ohan seemed a sage of patriarchal times who looked at the world from the summit of his experience of sixty years, contemplating the problems of the world as he smoked his "pipe of patience".

The life he had led and the thoughts that he had gleaned from it left a mysterious impression on my tender feelings.

Uncle Ohan had lived in his parents' village. He had worked there night and day, sown and reaped

the crop, looked after his parents, and buried them with honour; after marrying off his sister, he had himself got married and had children.

When he was forty, there was a distribution of land in the village. The wealthy people divided up the fertile lands among themselves and gave the barren soil to the poor.

Ohan was furious. He fanned the flames of a just revenge. All the villagers, who had been deprived, rebelled. They attacked and beat up the village chief and a few of the rich people.

The complaint reached the town. A bribed police officer arrived with a few policemen, rounded up the rebels, screamed at them, kept stamping his foot and ordered them to be flogged.

Blood rushed to Ohan's head, he picked up the first stone he could find and threw it at the officer. The rebels took courage, attacked the policemen and disarmed them, stoned the officer and the policemen, and drove them out of the village.

On the third day, when the Cossacks came to arrest the rebels, they had already fled to the mountains and had become outlaws.

In a short while, the fugitive villagers returned one by one, fell at the rich people's feet, begged to be forgiven, and were forgiven.

Ohan remained a fugitive with four companions. After some time, the four also returned and bowed their heads to the rich, and were forgiven. But Ohan remained alone and indomitable. He did not yield.

He rejected the message that the rich had sent him: to give himself up, repent and receive forgiveness.

Then one day, he was betrayed and caught in a village. They tied his hands behind his back, took him to the town of Gumri, where they tried and sentenced him to four years' imprisonment.

When Ohan was released from prison, he went to his own village. His sons were already grown up, they had become powerful and rich, but he felt alone in the village. He did not want to see the faces of his treacherous and cowardly companions. He did not want to stay in the village so that he would not have to meet his rich enemies.

While in prison, he had already dreamt of forsaking the world of men and becoming a recluse. And now, having left prison, he decided to retire to the mill. He would only come to the village when it was absolutely unavoidable.

His wife's and his sons' entreaties were powerless to break his determination.

"As long as I am alive, I will live and work here," he said, and he asked his sons to bury him there under his trees when he died.

And that was how Uncle Ohan became a recluse.

I remember quite clearly one of the times I visited him.

It was summer. After bathing in the Akhourian, I called on him for a chat.

Uncle Ohan sat leaning against a tree. A small skullcap partially covered the sparse, white hair on his head. His forehead was deeply furrowed. His enormous, snow-white beard had mingled with the grey hair on his open chest. He smoked his pipe pensively. At his feet dozed Aslan, Uncle Ohan's huge, faithful mastiff.

I greeted him and put the tea and sugar beside him. He looked at me with his thoughtful eyes buried in wrinkles.

"Good day, nephew,"—that was what he always called me.

Inflamed by the sun, the cicadas chirped away at noon: it seemed as if the sun, or rather its rays, were chirping shrilly and ardently.

The mill rumbled lazily on. A miserably lean donkey was tied to the door. It rubbed its flank vigorously against the corner of the wall. Hens scratched about here and there in the dust.

Uncle Ohan's aged wife, who had come to visit him, approached me with the words:

"You tell him, nephew, he won't listen to me, my man is out of sorts today: he says his back's aching. He's been in this wild place long enough: and what for? Let him come home and live decently! What are all our daughters-in-law for? Let them look after him! He works and works without resting in his old age! What's he going to take with him from this world?"

"Enough of your nagging, wife! How many

thousands of times have I told you: I have become a recluse! I won't go to the village again. My word's my word! As long as I can lift a finger I am going to work! I am not slaving to make a fortune! I don't want much. What my sons have is theirs and mine's mine! I'll earn my bread with my own sweat. I know it better than you do that you can't take anything away from this world, but I know just as well that man comes into this world to work. I can still use my hands, even if I am one foot in the grave! And that's all there is to it!

"There, take this tea and sugar, and set the table, let's have a bite to eat, put the kettle on and we shall have some tea with my agha's son!"

When the old woman had gone inside, I asked him:

"Are you ill, Uncle Ohan?"

"No, my dear boy, my backache is nothing new. I've had it for a long time, from my prison days. We're not getting any younger, you know, whatever the Giver has given us, He is now taking back little by little. That's the way of the world. And little by little, I am making my way towards my father."

And, thrusting his pipe into his belt, he stood up nimbly.

"Let's go to the kitchen garden and pick some onions and tarragon. My woman's brought me some pilaff with lamb today, let's have a meal together."

Uncle Ohan walked along the narrow path

through the meadow without a stick—he still did not have to use one. Aslan followed at his heels with his tongue hanging out.

I went on behind them.

Uncle Ohan's back was already bent, his head was quite buried in his shoulders, but his short, thickset legs were still sturdy.

Aslan, the enormous bluish-haired mastiff, was the third generation that had lived at the mill. His brothers and sisters lived at Uncle Ohan's home in the village.

Before this Aslan, two other Aslans had lived at the mill, one after the other, and Uncle Ohan had buried them at the end of the kitchen garden and placed a stone on their graves.

Uncle Ohan would recall with unfading sorrow each of the two previous Aslans' virtues, some incidents connected with them, and their devotion and bravery.

Aslan would not leave Uncle Ohan for a single moment. If they did not see each other, they would feel worried and anxiously look for one another.

They would even sit down to eat at the same time: Aslan would lap up his food while Uncle Ohan had his meal.

On winter evenings, Uncle Ohan would smoke his pipe, sitting next to the stove, and Aslan would lie at his feet, his head on his paws, silently following the spirals of smoke from uncle Ohan's pipe.

Whenever Aslan heard anyone mention Uncle

Ohan, he would open his eyes wide, prick up his ears, and wag his tail. He was always overjoyed to hear his master's name.

If anyone dared to touch any of Uncle Ohan's possessions in his absence, Aslan would become extremely furious, he would bark and rage until his master returned. However, he enjoyed fooling about with his master's belongings himself. He would often play small tricks on him: he would hide Uncle Ohan's tobacco-pouch or his handkerchief and, pretending to sleep, watch his master stir up every corner of the house, agitated, and then the dog would get up from where he lay and join in the search, find the article and gleefully take it to his master.

One day, my nephews had caught Aslan in the fields, taken him to our house by force and locked him up in a room, putting a big piece of meat in front of him, in order to get him used to our house. But Aslan ate practically nothing for two days and had howled incessantly, until my mother had released him.

And Aslan without hesitation had at once flown back to Uncle Ohan.

When one day I told the story to Uncle Ohan, he confidently said:

"Even if you were to take him to a king's palace and give him chicken and quail to eat every day, he would still run away and come back here."

And he added:

“That’s what I call a dog, a real dog. It isn’t a human being! Not some female! But a dog—that’s loyalty! Man’s nature could never understand a dog’s nature. Man is deceitful, he could never understand the meaning of loyalty!”

We sat in the shadow of the trees. Aslan, sitting on his haunches close by, was to share our meal. We threw him the bones and each time he cocked his head so that the bones fell straight into his mouth and in an instant were crunched up by his powerful teeth.

Uncle Ohan drank a glass of *raki* and offered me one, too:

“Drink it, nephew, drink it so that we’ll be happy. The most important thing in life is to be cheerful. Joy is one half of happiness. Whatever will happen will happen. What right have we to be sad? Time is in our hands just now, and let us be gay as long as it is. We may suddenly not have any more left. We may suddenly cease to exist!”

Uncle Ohan had a second glassful.

“I don’t like evil doings. I am not one to look for fights and I am very happy with my lot. This mill and this plot of land are more than enough for me. If they were to divide up the world, I would not even have this much. There are so many people with no homes, no land, no hope....

“Ah well, Mirza Mehdi, while you are alive, may

you be happy; when you are under the ground, may your sons live long lives! There was a song he used to sing during the two years he was in prison. The words are imprinted on my memory. I have repeated them every day to myself for the last twenty years:

*A simple hut in a green field
Is better than a shah's golden palace.
The bread you eat by your own sweat
Is better than the dishes of sultans.
The free breath of the wind
Is better than the song of the famous.
A stranger close to your heart
Is better than a rich, proud brother."*

"They are good words," I said, "but who was Mirza Mehdi?"

"He was a Persian: a man of my age. They had found counterfeit money on him and had thrown him into prison for it. We were there together for two years without a quarrel and we would eat out of the same dish. There was no question of yours or mine. I don't know if he was guilty or had been a victim. But there was not a man in prison who believed he was: everyone thought him innocent. He was a fine man, a very brainy fellow, and he was full of wise words.

"He would sit on the wooden bench, smoke his pipe without a break and would say, 'Let's smoke the pipe of patience until the door of freedom

opens.' I learnt those words from him and now I, too, smoke the pipe of patience until....

"Wife, fill us up one more!" Uncle Ohan interrupted his narrative, addressing his wife and raising his full glass. As if detaching himself from us for a moment, he fixed his gaze on the distance.

"To your health, Mirza Mehdi, dear brother," he said and, wiping his mouth, he turned to me:

"Ah, yes, what I wanted to say was that there has been patience in this world from the beginning and there always will be....

"There were all sorts of people in prison: experienced people, who had seen the world. There were Armenians, Turks, Kurds, and Russians; teachers, merchants, people who could read and write. I learnt a lot of things from those men. The money you earn may not be yours: someone can come along and take it away from you; but whatever you learn belongs to you.

"There was a fine young lad by the name of Sarkis. His own brother had cheated him in forty different ways and in the end he had tried to seize his land from him. Sarkis had shot him but hadn't killed him. They threw him into prison for a year. I hope all goes well with him. He was a good lad, honest and gentle as a lamb.

"Mirza Mehdi said about that greedy brother:

'A long time ago, a man went to the land of the Persians and in a village he asked them to give him some land that he might live there as their neigh-

bour. The elders of the village gave him a plot of land but he said, no, that wasn't enough! They gave him more land but he was still not content. Then the elders of the village said to him, 'You greedy man, there is a big meadow in front of you, go, run across it and you may have as much land as you can cover before you stop.' And the man ran and ran until he was out of breath, his heart gave out and he dropped dead.... Now, it's the same with your brother; he had his punishment: he saw death at his door. That was enough for him.

"Let's have a last drink."

I refused, but he had one.

"In prison there was a bankrupt merchant, who had swindled many people. It was funny: many of these used to send him food and drink every day. He would say that he was like Noah's debtor. It seems that during the Flood, when the ark was sailing on the waters, a man swam to it shouting, 'Dear Noah, let down the rope so that I may climb into your ark. Do you remember, when you had run out of fat, I gave you a skinful of it?' Noah pretended not to hear, thinking to himself, 'If I rescue him, he will be after me, wanting his fat returned. Let him go under.'

"Another man came near, saying, 'Save me, Noah, you are a good man. I had no flour one year and you lent me a sackful....' Noah said to his sons, 'Save him, the poor man.' And he thought to himself, 'If he gets drowned, I will lose my flour. If I

rescue him, he may work and pay back his debt.'

"Now, in the same way, these people were his creditors."

Uncle Ohan filled his pipe and drawing in and blowing a puff of smoke, he continued:

"So, you see, a prison is a small world. There is that one difference: in the outside world there live thieves and murderers who have not been caught, and in prison those that have been caught.

"In prison I got to know what's what: the reason for all bad things is that there is mine and yours. In towns and in villages they tear one another to pieces for money, for wealth and they steal other people's labour.

"And as long as there is money, there are no good people; and as long as there is 'mine' and 'yours', there is no love and conscience. And that's why there are the rich and the poor, the deprived and those that deprive, prisons and bloodshed.

"The Turks say, 'How do fights begin? One man eats and another watches him: that's how they start.' For myself, I have settled my accounts with the world. What else could I do? I fought, they put me in prison, and I was left alone. What can a lonely man do against the ways of the world? You can either hit or be hit, what's the use? It takes the whole village to hoist a heavy beam. I earn my bread without taking it away from another and I have always shared my honest bread with others, be they friends or strangers."

Mad Mekho arrived, flapping his arms about and calling out joyfully.

"My dear Mekho," said Uncle Ohan, "sit down and have something to eat."

"Mekho has such a happy heart," Uncle Ohan turned to me, "as if he knows nothing of old age and death. If you sold him the world, he wouldn't give you a penny for it. He is the richest man, because he is the most contented. He is the kindest and happiest of men."

Mekho was Uncle Ohan's nephew. He had become an orphan when he was a small child and he had grown up in his uncle's home as one of his children. He was about thirty years of age, had a narrow forehead and a big nose, and was tall.

"He is a madman," the villagers called him a harmless madman. He would speak in a disjointed way of this and that, of mountains and valleys. But he was always of happy disposition. He seemed never to have felt any sadness. The evil things of the world appeared to him to have a good face. Everything was an occasion for laughter: even death and all the elements of death—pain, illness, and old age.

Mekho lived with his Uncle Ohan, although he had one foot in the mill and the other in the village. They managed to look after the household between them, there being a dozen or two chickens and ducks and a milch cow. Together they would reface the millstone and put it in order.

Mekho was very much devoted to Uncle Ohan and obeyed his every word. And he would answer Uncle Ohan's questions quite reasonably.

Mekho would not wear a cap, be it spring or winter. His hair was matted on his scalp like felt. Only when it was extremely cold would he wear a hood.

Whenever they gave him a cap, he would throw it to the ground, saying, "Find my fur cap and I'll wear it. I don't want another. Mine cost six *abassis*."*

The village youths would ask him every time they saw him:

"Where is your fur cap, Mekho?"

And every time he would give them the same reply, sometimes as many as a hundred times a day:

"What?"

"Where is your fur cap?"

"Whose?"

"Where is *your* fur cap?"

"My fur cap? Oh, yes. The wind blew it away. I don't know whether it was the year of the cholera or the year my uncle's horse disappeared, only a devilish gale came up, seized the world and spun it round like a millstone. I got under a big stone, hung on to it and hid there. The wind only took my fur cap and carried it away. Who knows on top of which mountain peak it is now? On which sea it is bobbing up and down?"

* Monetary unit in Caucasus.—*Ed.*

“What a hat that was! What a hat! It cost six *abassis!*”

Kneeling by the table-cloth, Mekho put into his mouth whatever he could lay hands on and looked at Uncle Ohan with a happy face.

“Did you go to the village, Mekho?” asked Uncle Ohan.

“Who?”

“Did you go to the village?”

“No, my dear uncle, I went and stood in the road and had a little chat with the passers-by.”

“Uncle dear,” he added, with laughter, “they said Bato Agha, the Greek, has died, haha, haha, haha, he has died!”

And his whole body shook with laughter.

Uncle Ohan shut his eyes for a while, rubbed his forehead with his left hand and then, fixing his eyes upon me, said:

“He was a swindler and would steal the shirt off a poor man’s back. If he were the sun itself, Bato Agha would not be able to warm up a single man.

“May the Lord have pity upon the dead beside him!”

And after taking one or two sips of tea, he continued:

“I knew him well: he was as mean as he was greedy. If you gave him the whole world, he would still have his eye on the grain of barley that an ant carried away. A greedy man’s stomach can be full, but his eyes will always be hungry.

“This man wouldn’t even eat anything, he just hoarded things. He didn’t even have any sons, and everything he acquired went to his sons-in-law. That’s the way of the world: a miser’s body is eaten up by lice and his money by strangers.

“Man is mortal,” summarised Uncle Ohan, “if his good deeds remain, then he remains also. Now, for instance, if you put the sugar in the tea, it melts away, disappears, it is no more, but the tea becomes sweet. In the same way, when a good man dies, his good deeds sweeten the world. Otherwise, without good people the world would be very bitter, as bitter as snake’s venom!”

“Who?” asked Mekho.

“I am talking about Bato Agha, my dear Mekho.”

“If he had given a morsel of bread to somebody, it wouldn’t have ruined him!” said Mekho and laughed.

“That’s my clever Mekho!” encouraged him Uncle Ohan, giving Mekho a large lump of sugar, which the latter crunched noisily between his teeth.

The day was drawing to its close. Mountains floated in violet mist. Sunflowers hung their golden heads. Labourers plodded back home from the fields and the meadows.

I stood up to go. Uncle Ohan walked with me to

the end of the kitchen garden, picking a few tender cucumbers for me on the way.

We stopped at the end of the garden. Uncle Ohan thoughtfully looked around at the fields and the winding shimmering river, and the paths through the fields; he gazed at the distant mountains, which had been a familiar site for years, looked at the setting sun and, lighting up his pipe, he inhaled a puff of smoke, and then, blowing it out with a deep sigh, he said:

“So we’ve grown old and have come to the end: the end of everything, the end of life, the end of the world.... What does it matter? I have only one wish: that as long as I am alive I may be up and about, and continue to work and, sitting here by the door of my mill, I may smoke my pipe of patience, and hear good news every day from the four corners of the world. I don’t want anything else...”

Dear Uncle Ohan!

Many years have gone by, much has grown dim in my memory, but I shall never forget your patriarchal image.

And I always remember your unforgettable tales, and the unruffled smoke from your pipe of patience is still before my eyes, in my mind I can still hear the calm sound of your voice that has been silent all these years....

REQUEST TO READERS

Progress Publishers would be glad to have your opinion of this book, its translation and design.

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Аветик Исаакян

ИЗБРАННОЕ

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